When Linux Was Perfect Enough

The other day my colleague, friend and sometimes partner-in-crime, Ken Starks, published an article here on FOSS Force on one of his favorite gripes: things that don't work right in Linux. This time he was complaining about a font issue in Mint when using KDE. This is nothing new from Ken. In the past he's written other articles about broken aspects of various Linux distros that never seem to get fixed. It's his contention that these "small" bugs, which remain unfixed release after release after release, are largely responsible for desktop Linux's failure to take hold with the general public.

He might be right.

For Christmas I bought my roommate a new second generation Nexus 7 tablet running Android, an OS built around the Linux kernel. It "just worked," out of the box, with no tweaking necessary. During the last seven months she's used it for hours daily. As far as I know, she's found no glitches that require fixing. I'm reasonably certain I'd know if she did, since the main reason I gave her the Nexus to begin with was

because I had tired of trying to keep her Windows laptop running to her satisfaction. She has no trouble telling me when her computer goes kaput, and she always wants it fixed right now. Facebook waits for no one, you know.

I point this out because Linux has all but taken over the tablet and phone end of the computing spectrum. Apple makes plenty of money with the iPhone and iPad, but that's due to their high prices. In market share, they lag far behind Android devices. And Microsoft has proven that Windows isn't the unbeatable giant it was once thought to be. Even with massive money spent on television ads and conspicuous product placement in nearly every scripted drama on CBS, mobile devices running Windows remain a mere asterisk when looking at market share.

In other words, Linux is winning the mobile war because Google makes certain that Android "just works" out of the box.

Today's average computer users (I loath the word "consumers") want to get things done on their computers without having to delve under the hood to fix things. This is understandable and isn't unlike the average automobile owners, who just want to drive their cars without knowing or caring how it works. Just as most drivers take their car to the shop for repair to solve mechanical and computer related issues, most computer users take their devices to the shop with no concern about whether the problem is hardware or software related. They just want the damn thing to work.

It wasn't always this way.

Back in 2002 I installed GNU/Linux for the first time. At that time, like most Americans, I was tethered to a dial-up connection, with broadband not yet being available in my part of the boondocks. I spent seventy bucks or so for a shrink wrapped Powerpack edition of Mandrake 9.0 at a local Best Buy store, which in those days sold both Mandrake and Red Hat, which was still in the desktop business.

During that age of the dinosaur, Mandrake was considered to be the cat's meow of easy-to-use Linux distributions. It installed easily, some said easier than Windows, and its partitioning tool made cutting up a disk easier than slicing a piece of mincemeat pie. Indeed, Linux old-timers sometimes openly laughed at Mandrake, insinuating that ease-of-use somehow made Linux less Linux.

But I loved it and found it to be a whole new world. Gone was the blue screen of death and the nearly daily crashes that were business as usual with Windows. Unfortunately, also gone were a lot of peripherals that had "just worked" in Windows.

The first thing I had to do after installing Mandrake was to take my white box to Michelle at Dragonware Computers and have the cheap winmodem swapped out for a hardware modem. Granted, a hardware

modem means a more responsive computer, but with the computer store forty miles away, this was a bit of an inconvenience and an expense I could little afford.

But I didn't mind. I was free of Microsoft –- and using a "different" operating system made me feel as if I was some sort of computing genus.

Printers were also a problem, but not as much a problem with Mandrake as with most other distros which required command line work to install. Mandrake offered up a snazzy graphical interface for configuring printers – if you were lucky enough to have a printer that would work in Linux at all. Many, if not most, wouldn't.

My still under warranty Lexmark, which in Windows had more whistles and bells than any printer needs, wasn't supported by the manufacturer, but I was able to find an open source, backwards engineered driver that kinda, sorta worked. It worked fine for printing web pages from the Mozilla browser, but printed Star Office pages in tiny fonts that were crammed up into the upper right corner of the page. The printer also made some very loud mechanical clunking noises which reminded me of the noise a car transmission makes just before it dies.

The workaround for the Star Office problem was to save everything as a text file and print from a text editor. For the noise that indicated the printer was in self-destruct mode? Try to avoid printing as much as possible was my solution.

Other problems abounded – too many for me to remember.

One problem I do remember is that I couldn't get the sound card to work out of the box, although Mandrake's interface showed the sound card detected and installed. After days of digging through the forums with no luck, someone finally suggested I might have a problem with permissions. I looked and, lo and behold!, he was right. Mandrake had installed the sound card with permissions which wouldn't let it work in a user account, yet another one of those things that should have been fixed before the distro was released, as Ken would point-out. Especially in a distro being sold in a shrink wrapped box for seventy dollars a pop – which was considerably more money in 2002 than it is now.

Oh yes, and I still have a parallel port scanner that I bought new about two weeks before my move to Linux which has been nothing but a brick since, as there's still no Linux driver for it.

My point is that back in those days none of this mattered. Most of us were already used to having to fiddle with configuration files and such, even when using "IBM compatible" computers running Microsoft products. Like most users in those days, I'd cut my teeth on command line DOS machines, where printers had to be configured separately for each and every program and where the ability to write a succinct

autoexec.bat file was a necessity.

Linux as a 1966 "goat."

Tinkering with the inner workings of the operating system was simply part of owning a computer. Most of us using computers back then were either geeks or wanna be geeks. We were proud of our ability to tinker and get our machines working just like we wanted. We were the high tech version of the good ol' boys from an earlier age, who spent their Saturday afternoons under a shade tree modifying their muscle cars with headers, breathers, trick carburetors and the like.

And that's mostly not who's using computers today.

Today's computer user just wants the computer to work, without problems, out of the box. They don't want to have to figure out why Hulu or Netflix doesn't work or why their fonts display properly in some applications and not in others. They don't want to hear, "oh, that's just an easily fixed small bug" after a Linux install any more than they want to hear that an ignition switch that stalls their new Chevy in heavy traffic is "only a glitch which we'll fix one day."

These days, that includes me. While I'm happy I have enough skills to usually fix a bug that made it past the developers at Mint or Fedora, I'd just as soon not have to deal with it. I have work to get done. And when I'm not working, I want to be wasting time with my friends on Facebook, not getting aggravated with my computer.

To be sure, Linux has changed with the times. In recent years you can pretty much be sure that when you install a major Linux distro on a laptop, Wi-Fi will work out of the box. Also, most of the time all you have to do is plug a new printer into a USB port and, presto!, it's already up and running. But there are still way too many little niggling problems that need to get fixed – stuff that should have been fixed long ago.

Maybe if Ken keeps complaining enough…